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THE CHAOS OF BRITISH POLITICS

BY SYDNEY BROOKS

THE present moment finds British politics in a state of confusion that almost reaches the point of incoherency. We used in England to think them comparatively simple. We used to pride ourselves on the stable succession of Liberals by Conservatives and Conservatives by Liberals. We used to contrast the harmonious interplay of our two-party system with the tangled warfare of groups and factions that on the Continent does duty for Parliamentary Government. These titles to satisfaction are ours no longer. The irruption twenty-five years ago of a pledge-bound and independent Irish party, forming temporary alliances with both of the historic parties, but absorbed in neither, was the first sign that the machine which had worked so smoothly for two whole generations was getting out of gear. Since then, without the average Englishman being wholly conscious of it, it has been smashed to atoms and rebuilt on a far more intricate model. A more intricate model, but not, perhaps, so new an one as people think. The conditions of present-day party politics in Great Britain appear to be undergoing a transformation which is not so much a revolution as a reversion. Complicated as they are, they are not more so than they were during the years that followed Sir Robert Peel's adoption of Free Trade in the forties or during the latter end of the eighteenth century. We might really seem in England to be returning to a type of Government with which our forefathers were tolerably familiar and under which they managed to conduct the business of the country with astonishing success. They grappled with and overcame pretty nearly all the difficulties that confront us to-day. Parties no longer compact and homogeneous wholes, but split up into contending sections; Cabinets formed less to prosecute a definite and united policy than to conciliate this

interest and that; the electorate bewildered by a multiplicity of factions; and the business of Government forced from a straightforward path into devious routes milestoned with deals and bargains and log-rolling accommodations—all these phenomena which astonish us to-day have been at one time or another the commonplaces of English politics. It was, indeed, out of a confusion worse confounded than our own that the Liberal and Conservative parties were hammered, divided the nation into almost equal halves, and for more than fifty years, with a regularity that seemed to be the product of natural law, assumed alternately the guidance of affairs. Some such evolutionary phase may again lie ahead of us; and the floating atoms of British politics may once more precipitate into two stable and comprehensive parties of “Socialists” and “non-Socialists.” That, however, is a development of the future. For the time being all is chaotic, transitional, and uncertain.

But if the aspects presented by British politics to-day recall, and can in a measure be paralleled by, the past, in other and more vital ways they are altogether singular to the times in which we live. A mid-Victorian statesman, indeed, would be hard put to it to recognize in the England of the present the country and the institutions which he knew fifty or sixty years ago. In the past half-century the composition of the House of Commons, the conditions under which it works, the questions that most engross it, and the popular attitude toward it have all completely changed. The House no longer has the hold over the country that it used to have. To be a member of Parliament is still an honor, but scarcely the honor it was. It is a claim to consideration where it used to be a claim to distinction. It carries with it a position, but the position has been robbed of much of its old prestige. It is a commonplace of English politics nowadays, for instance, as well as of English journalism, that the people no longer read Parliamentary debates. The political instruction of the nation is carried on outside the walls of the House of Commons. Men still look to members of Parliament for guidance and guidance is abundantly supplied to them—I know of no country where the average citizen has more or better opportunities of hearing both sides—but it is not from the Front Bench at Westminster, but from the platform at huge popular meetings, as a sort of perambulating lecturer on politics, that the rising states-

man, and even the statesman who has already risen, now addresses the country.

Again, Parliament to-day has to compete for popular interest with a new and multiplying host of minor assemblies. There has been within the last thirty years a vast extension of local government throughout Great Britain. County Councils, Borough Councils, and municipalities have not only increased in numbers, but have quintupled their activities. Men who prefer the reality of power to its semblance and its appanages find a readier scope for their energies, can really achieve more, and, above all, can see their achievements bear immediate fruit if instead of entering Parliament they throw themselves into the work of local administration. The sphere is smaller, but its opportunities are more individual; and its duties, as Lord Rosebery has often insisted, at least as interesting and far more intimately related to the welfare of society. But though a beginning has been made with decentralization, the pressure and the complexities of Parliamentary business remain more formidable than ever. The widening sphere of local activities has been more than counterbalanced by the growth and urgency of national and Imperial affairs; and the plain fact that Parliament can no longer do its work, that it is hopelessly overburdened and congested and has ceased to be an efficient assembly, lies very near the root of popular impatience and indifference. The unforgettable record of the Unionist Government that waged the Boer War, and its blazing display of official incompetence, raised alienation for a time to positive and disgusted contempt. The English people have outgrown, perhaps forever, their old innocent and touching faith in the capacity of British Ministers merely because they are British Ministers. They feel the need of a higher standard of administration, and they are conscious that Parliament grows yearly less competent to provide it.

Nor is this all. The difference between the outside and the inside view of things political is always great. In England it is, perhaps, greater, as a rule, than in any other country. But in this matter of the authority, efficiency, and repute of Parliament, I note a most unusual approximation between the views of the average M.P. and the views of the average elector. One hears in the lobbies of the House of Commons expressions of weariness and discontent at least as whole-hearted as any that are uttered by the man in the

street. The more earnest a Member of Parliament is, the more quickly does he become convinced that of all reforms the reform of Parliament is the most urgent. The rights and opportunities of the private member have been almost extinguished. The Cabinet grows yearly more and more autocratic and the House of Commons more and more subservient. It has happened more than once of late that the only question in which the country was interested has been denied discussion by the people's representatives through a skilful use of Parliamentary forms. The less crowded times when a measure could be debated clause by clause, almost sentence by sentence, have completely passed by. Nowadays the closure is automatically applied at the discretion of the Government, debate is regulated by a fixed time-table, whole clauses are voted *en bloc* without discussion, and from a deliberative assembly the House is relapsing more and more into an assembly that ratifies and registers the decrees of the inner Cabinet. From the point of view of achievement, of the possibility of getting things done, the private member to-day is nothing, and the Cabinet Minister, if he belongs to that little group which really constitutes a Cabinet within the Cabinet, everything; and it is scarcely too much to say that for matters to continue as they now are must ultimately mean the extinction of Parliamentary government of the old type and the substitution for it of Cabinet government.

We have, indeed, all but reached that stage already. Legislation tends with increasing celerity to become a mere matter of executive decree. The independent man, who refuses to obey every crack of the party whip, is extinct. The upshot of all divisions in the House of Commons is a foregone conclusion. Debate has become merely a formal and futile accessory to a predestined course of events. There never was a time when the caucus in the constituencies was more despotic or the organization of parties inside the House more rigid or Parliamentary procedure more mechanical. Even the sporting interest which used to attach to the deliberations of the national legislature is gone; and to a student of political phenomena Great Britain affords an extraordinary example of the ease with which determined minorities can manipulate the direction of affairs in the name of "the people," but to their own advantage. The result of a General Election nowadays is that the repre-

sentatives of one-half the voters in the kingdom claim and exercise the right to a virtually unrestricted power over the other half, and that nearly all legislation in consequence is conceived and passed in the interests and under the pressure of particular classes and sections. Ministries nowadays treat both Parliament and the electorate with a high-handedness that is the quintessence of Jacobinism. They introduce a bill voting themselves and all other members of the House a salary of two thousand dollars a year without making the least attempt to consult the voters in advance and ascertain their views on a measure which may powerfully affect the quality of Parliament and which has certainly lowered its standing in the popular mind. If any of their bills meets with a mishap in its passage through the House and an amendment is carried against it, they see nothing strange in summoning the assembly forthwith to cancel its obnoxious vote and to proceed with the bill as though nothing had happened. In the relentless hounding out of public life of all men who show the least inclination to take a line of their own; in the increasing tendency to vest the interpretation of Acts of Parliament in Government departments instead of in the law courts, and to reverse inconvenient or unpopular judicial decisions by legislative enactment; and in the multiplications of bureaucratic functions one sees the symptoms of a possible collapse of the party system as an instrument of representative government. Small wonder that in their anxiety to reassert the authority of the electorate and to temper the arbitrary character of Parliamentary proceedings, Englishmen in growing numbers should be advocating the Referendum, proportional representation, the election of the Cabinet by the House of Commons itself on a non-partisan basis, and similar devices for curbing that ministerial autocracy which has supplanted, and may in the end prove not less intolerable than, the monarchical absolutism of former days.

Nor do these portents stand alone. The spread of cheap distractions and enjoyments and of cheaper newspapers has not only weakened the popular interest in politics, but has impaired that faculty of concentrated and continuous thought which used to invest affairs of State with an attractiveness not so greatly inferior to that of football. Within the last few years, during the struggle between the Lib-

erals and the House of Lords, the British people saw their old Constitution, which was perhaps the most adaptable and convenient system of government that the world has ever known, brought definitely to an end. They saw the powers of an ancient assembly truncated with a violence that in almost any other land would have spelled barricades and bloodshed. They saw the road cleared, or partially cleared, for developments that must profoundly affect, and that in all probability will absolutely transform, the whole scheme of the British State. And all this they watched with hardly a flicker of popular emotion. When Roundheads and Cavaliers were lining up for the battle of Edgehill a Warwickshire squire was observed between the opposing forces placidly drawing the coverts for a fox. The British people during the progress of the constitutional conflict seemed more than once to resemble that historic huntsman. They answered the screaming exhortations of the politicians with whispers of more than Delphic ambiguity; they went unconcernedly about their pleasures and business, to all appearances unvexed by the din of revolution in their ears; they presented the spectacle, more common in France than in England, of a tranquil nation with agitated legislators; and the only tenable explanation of their conduct was simply that they were not interested. For the great masses of the democracy the politics of bread and butter have completely ousted the politics of ideas and abstractions, and have imported, it should be added, into the general estimate of men and measures a cynical and mercenary note that is a new and disquieting phenomenon in British public life. Moreover, as was conspicuously seen at the time of the great coal strike a year ago, and to a lesser degree in the railway strike of the preceding summer, the fight between Labor and Capital, which is *the* outstanding issue of our times, lies, and must necessarily lie, very largely outside the jurisdiction of Parliament. Parliament, that is to say, is being overshadowed by outside agencies and organizations. It can never, or hardly ever, pass any measure or adopt any course of action so vital to the well-being of the country as the decisions which may at any moment be come to in the executive offices of the great labor and capitalistic federations.

And besides all this, and as a further and not less disturbing element in the present situation, there is the fact

that the British Constitution is in suspense. The Parliament Act of 1911 was designed to shackle the powers of the House of Lords. Its essential clause laid it down that any bill other than a Money Bill which is passed by the House of Commons in three successive sessions in not less than two years shall become law, in spite of the opposition of the House of Lords. Thus the Irish Home Rule Bill on January 30th was rejected by the Upper Chamber. In the old days that would have meant the death of the measure. But under the provisions of the Parliament Act the Home Rule Bill will be reintroduced and passed in the House of Commons next session and sent up again to the Lords. If they again throw it out the same operation will be repeated in the following session, and even if the Lords reject the bill for the third time it will none the less become law. This obviously is an extremely clumsy and roundabout way of doing things and it is not intended to be permanent. At some future but unspecified date that seems to grow every year more remote, the Liberals are pledged to tackle the problem of reforming the composition of the House of Lords, and if and when that exceedingly difficult and delicate undertaking is carried through, the Parliament Act will necessarily be amended to square with the new state of affairs. But for the present its provisions are in full force and the Liberals in consequence are under a strong, and indeed an irresistible, compulsion to pass as many measures as they possibly can in the early sessions of each Parliament. The duration of Parliament is limited by the Act to five years; a governmental measure can only be passed over the heads of the Lords after two years have elapsed since its second reading in the House of Commons; the result is that if the Liberals are to appear before the country, when the hour for a General Election has struck, with a record of successful achievement, they must crowd their principal measures into the first two or two and a half years of their existence. This is precisely what they have been doing. Never has Parliament been so ruthlessly overworked or the public so bewildered by the numbers and immensity of the bills it reads about in the papers and hears discussed from the platform as since the election of December, 1910. Measures that in other and saner days would each monopolize a whole session are now driven four abreast at breakneck speed through a jaded and distracted House by the use and abuse of every

device for limiting debate, gagging the Opposition, and over-riding the established forms of Parliamentary procedure.

Such are some of the more general features of the present political situation in Great Britain; and they are sufficiently serious to stir many anxious misgivings. Nor are one's apprehensions quieted when one turns to a study of the separate parties and examines their prospects and programmes. In the last week of January the Government were obliged to drop their long-promised and momentous measure of Electoral Reform under circumstances that covered them with ridicule, and the magnitude and unexpectedness of the disaster have left them sore, bewildered, and dismayed. But the Opposition are in hardly any better plight. Ever since the New Year they have been absorbed with internal dissensions and recriminations over the leading plank in their platform—the additional taxation, namely, of food with a view to granting the various units of the Empire a preferential entrance into the British market. The upshot of a process of self-inquiry which threatened at one moment to bring about another change in the Unionist leadership and to disrupt the party both in and out of the House is that the policy of Imperial Preference, outlined by Mr. Chamberlain ten years ago and consistently advocated ever since as the only means of “saving the Empire,” has been so profoundly modified as to be almost abandoned; but not a Unionist can tell how far the desertion of the flag under which they have fought for a decade will favorably impress the electorate. There is something, indeed, in the state of the Unionist party at this moment that might well move even the most ferocious of Liberals to a passing commiseration. Always excepting Mr. Balfour, they have not a man of first-rate ability among them. Never in modern British politics has a party been so bleakly destitute not merely of commanding, but even of interesting personalities. Its nominal leader, Mr. Bonar Law, has been a very doubtful success. He has, it is true, some at least of the attributes of political generalship; he fights, he shows sport, he is confident, plain-spoken, always aggressive, and not infrequently deliberately provocative. It has happened two or three times that his zeal in attack has outrun discretion and that his sallies have delivered him into the hands of the enemy. But a party will forgive much to a leader who has an air of pugnacity and directness and determination and shows

that he means business and possesses driving-power. Mr. Balfour, for all his agility in criticism and defense, was often vacillating in attack. He was alternately delighting his followers and disheartening them. He seemed at times as a leader equally indispensable and disastrous; and he never quite succeeded in establishing a current of sympathy and comprehension with the mass of the people. It is one of Mr. Bonar Law's good points that he is always intelligible. He understands the "man in the street" and is understood by him; and that is a very considerable asset. But while in these respects the new leader has advantages that the old one did not command, in other respects it is almost ludicrous to institute a comparison between the two men. Mr. Balfour was a first-rate statesman in charge of a third-rate party. The party remains as it was; but it has now found a second-rate leader and feels more at home with him. The descent from the intellectual standpoint is prodigious. Mr. Balfour never takes part in a debate that he does not raise it to a higher level. Mr. Bonar Law's speeches, so far as quality and ideas are concerned, are those of the average party hack and nothing more. They are expressed, of course, with far more precision and lucidity and power than the average party hack can dispose of. But they are as barren of suggestiveness and of elevation and as intrinsically commonplace as the most ardent country gentleman could desire. Mr. Balfour is a philosopher and Mr. Bonar Law an ironmaster. The former has perhaps the most subtle, supple, spacious, and free-roving mind that has devoted itself to contemporary politics. The latter has the keen, quick, narrow mind of the Glasgow merchant. He belongs altogether to the new school, and is, indeed, a symbol of a new era. The Conservative party has never had a leader so divorced by birth and education and associations from the traditions of its past. He is a dealer in facts and not in ideas, a strong, pertinacious, clear-headed, unimaginative man of affairs, an effective but not an ingratiating debater, careless of "manner," intent on "results." The country is interested in him, if only because he is still on trial in a very difficult post; but it cannot as yet be said to have any great admiration for him, and it is perfectly conscious that, by comparison with his predecessor, he is of an inferior and second-rate stamp. To an onlooker it seems very plain that Mr. Bonar Law does not supply the Unionists with the most

desirable acquisition that a party in these days can possibly possess—a compelling personality.

Without great men you cannot have great ideas. A new England has arisen since the Boer War, throbbing with passionate aspirations, struggling as never before toward a closer equality of opportunity, sinking old political issues in a supremely earnest effort to grapple with the master question of “the condition of the people.” Of this new England and its ideals and essence the Unionists betray hardly the smallest comprehension. They have not lost touch with it because they have never been in touch with it. They are as alien to its spirit and aims as if they lived—a great many of them as a matter of fact do live—in another world. Therein lies the party’s fatal and fundamental weakness. The inquiring, restless, questioning, self-assertive, and self-realizing democracy of to-day has passed beyond them. They do not understand it; the French aristocracy before the Revolution was scarcely more blind to the portents that the old order was in process of disruption. Of the capacity for national leadership, of the power of dramatic sympathy, they show no signs. They have no policy of social reform whatever and no inkling of one. They cannot even evolve an agrarian programme that is in any way suitable to English conditions. Their Irish policy remains as unenlightened, as anti-Imperialist, and as purely obstructive as it was five and twenty years ago. In the past eight years they have used the House of Lords to throw out Liberal measures of social, educational, and electoral reform, and it was on their insistence that the Lords committed the monstrous outrage on the Constitution of rejecting the Budget of 1909. Yet when the Liberals put every other question on one side and closed with the Upper Chamber in a desperate grip, the Unionists, while rejecting the opportunity of settling the whole issue by conference and consent, practically threw the Lords overboard, officially discountenanced the idea of resisting the Parliament Act *à l’outrance*, and themselves put forward various schemes for reforming the Upper House that were decidedly more revolutionary and more opposed to what one had always supposed to be the principles of conservatism, than anything that the Liberals had proposed. The Unionist party, in fact, lacks the three prime requisites of political health. It lacks men; it lacks ideas; it lacks principles. It began by

welcoming almost effusively Mr. Lloyd George's Insurance Act. It applauded its objects and approved its principle. But the moment the leaders in the House found they could gain a temporary political advantage by opposing it they fell upon it tooth and nail. The most daring and beneficent scheme of national betterment ever proposed and carried in a single Parliament was twisted by them to serve their petty electioneering ends. Those were the tactics of men without any real convictions and simply bent on playing the immediate political game.

And now it turns out that they do not even believe in the scheme of Tariff Reform which they have preached incessantly for the past decade. Mr. Chamberlain in 1903 committed them to the advocacy of protection as a means of staying Great Britain's commercial decline, and of Imperial Preference, involving the taxation of food, as a means of cementing the Empire, which otherwise, he declared, would infallibly fall to pieces. It is hardly too much to say that every statement and prophecy he ventured upon has been falsified, and that every test by which he sought to prove the decay of British trade has served merely to show its gigantic and increasing expansion. Instead of a decade of ruin Great Britain has had a decade of records; and the yearly Board of Trade figures have made the whole case for Tariff Reform ridiculous. And as for Mr. Chamberlain's conviction that the Empire without preferential tariffs would drift asunder, it is enough to point to the Empire as it is to-day and to the enormous advance that the past seven years have witnessed in the direction of Imperial consolidation. At three successive elections the British people have conclusively demonstrated their repugnance to the Chamberlain programme, and the Unionists themselves have either lost all faith in it or have convinced themselves that it is a fatal obstacle to their return to power. Mr. Balfour in 1910, when he was still the leader of the party, pledged himself to submit the Tariff Reform Budget to a referendum before it went into effect. Lord Lansdowne last November announced that on further consideration the Unionist leaders had decided that Mr. Balfour's pledge was no longer binding. So great a cry of alarm and anger instantly came up from Lancashire that Mr. Bonar Law and Lord Lansdowne were forced to retract their retraction. They did not reinstate the referendum, but after five weeks

or so of heated discussion they gave it out that no additional food taxes would be imposed until they had been submitted to the people at a second General Election. That is equivalent to postponing them to the Greek Kalends. But whether the Unionists will gain anything by their latest manœuvre is highly doubtful. They have practically killed Imperial Preference—the one feature of the Tariff Reform movement that lent it a touch of idealism and greatness; and they now find themselves saddled with Protection in its most squalid and corrupting form and with nothing whatever to offer to the British farmer except a tax on all he buys and on nothing he sells. That is a position in which I see little prospect of permanence. These endless tergiversations have well-nigh destroyed the confidence of the country in the sincerity and good faith of the Unionist party. Nobody knows what they stand for or what policy they would pursue if returned to power; and the confusion has been only intensified by the spectacle of “the party of law and order” backing up the extremists of Ulster in their threats of an armed rebellion.

Compared with the drifting helplessness of their opponents, the Liberals are undoubtedly in happier circumstances. They have held office for eight years; they have carried many great measures of reform; they have conducted the foreign policy of the kingdom with conspicuous success; they have vastly augmented its naval and military strength; they have set up an extremely high standard of efficient administration; and they have shown the two qualities that are most essential to political success—courage and imagination. There has never been in English history a more fruitful or a more energetic régime, and no sign is yet apparent of lassitude or staleness. But there are at least four fairly definite dangers that encompass them. In the first place, there is the question of Ulster. Nobody really knows what is going to happen in the northeast corner of Ireland if the Home Rule Bill becomes law. But it is clear that any Government which is faced with the necessity of coercing the Ulster Protestants in order to compel them to accept and obey a predominantly Catholic Parliament in Dublin will be very awkwardly placed. A good many Liberals believe that it would be better even now to submit the Home Rule Bill to a General Election so that a specific mandate might be obtained for dealing with its possible conse-

quences; and the *Spectator* on February 1st gave it as its deliberate opinion that Mr. Asquith had decided in his own mind that this course would have to be taken. The inducement to adopt it is that Mr. Bonar Law has stated that the Opposition would advise Ulster to submit, or at any rate would not encourage it to resist, if an appeal to the electorate resulted in a verdict in favor of the Home Rule Bill. The inducements against it are that there could be no guarantee of confining the issue to Home Rule alone, that an adverse verdict would turn out the Government and destroy the bill, and that the risk of such a catastrophe would severely strain the relations between the Irish Nationalists and their Liberal allies. In any case, the Ulster problem would still remain; and as it is a problem that contains a potentiality of something like civil war, Liberals cannot be quite easy in their minds until it is settled.

Then, again, an indispensable element in the coalition that maintains the present Government in power is the Labor party, and the Labor men are auxiliaries who partake a good deal of the nature of guerrillas. They have no particular fondness for Mr. Asquith; Mr. Burns they detest; the Cabinet contains no member who is entirely acceptable to them; every outbreak of industrial unrest finds them at daggers drawn with the Government; in the constituencies they have repeatedly run candidates of their own against the Liberal nominee and have thus handed over seat after seat to the Conservatives; and if they were a little surer of the unplumbed social forces which they are supposed to represent, and if they had any strong leader or were less embarrassed by the consciousness that so far they have cut a rather poor figure in Parliament, they would probably cut adrift altogether from the Liberal connection. Even as it is they present Liberalism with a permanent dilemma that may at any moment become acute. For the Government to prosecute a policy which the Radical extremists and the Labor men can be persuaded to support is to arouse the opposition of a whole army of vested interests and to make every property-owner fidgety; and as Lord Rosebery reminded his former colleagues a few years ago, it is the suspicion of hostility to property that sooner or later has overthrown every Liberal Ministry of the last forty years. But not to prosecute that policy is to sign the death warrant of Liberalism and to abdicate in favor of Mr. Keir Hardie and the

Socialists. These are the fundamental alternatives between which the Government has to choose; and the choice taxes all its adroitness and all its resolution.

In the third place, there is the danger concealed in the question of Woman Suffrage. This is a question which cuts across all the normal lines of party division and which no Government that is ever likely to be in office in our time can afford to incorporate in its official programme, for the reason that both the Liberals and the Conservatives are at odds among themselves over its merits and expediency. In the present Cabinet, for instance, Mr. Asquith and Mr. Harcourt are among the stoutest opponents and Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Lloyd George among the warmest advocates of the women's claim, while among the Unionists it is espoused by Mr. Balfour and Mr. Lyttelton and derided by Mr. Austen Chamberlain and Mr. Long. No Government, therefore, can bring forward a measure for the enfranchisement of women as a Government measure, while the attempt to introduce it as an amendment to an official bill was responsible for the withdrawal of the Franchise Bill a few weeks ago, for the humiliation of the Government, and for the conversion of the House of Commons into a chaos. Whether the new device of promising Government facilities to a bill brought forward by a private member will succeed in disposing of the question remains to be seen; but so long as it is unsettled and the public mind is disturbed and exasperated by suffragette outrages and the public conscience rasped by the treatment of the offenders in prison so long will the Government suffer a certain loss of credit and authority. But the fourth and by far the greatest peril that besets the Liberals is their own insatiable energy. Conscious of the enormous leeway that has to be made up before England becomes a country that even approaches their ideal of what it should and might be, confronted on every side with unsolved questions and enticing vistas of social betterment, they have rather succumbed to the temptation of doing and attempting too much.

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